

“What Does It Mean?”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

5-31-20 Pentecost Sunday

Based upon Lam. 3:19-24; Acts 2:1-12

There is a possibly apocryphal story sometimes told about a battalion of Roman soldiers during the First Century. During this time, when much of the world was uncharted, map makers would mark unknown territories with dragons or monsters to indicate that potential danger lurked there.¹ Anyway, according to the story, a Roman battalion was caught up for some time in a great battle which led them into territory that the map makers had marked with dragons and monsters. When the battle finally ended, the commander did not know if he should retreat with his troops into more familiar territory, or forge ahead into the unknown. So, he sent an urgent message to Rome: “Please send new orders. We have marched off the map.”²

Regardless of whether the story is fact or fiction, I like it because it captures well where we all are right now. We have marched off the map in virtually all of the aspects of our lives during this pandemic, but especially in the life of the Church. Never before have we had to close the building for months on end, and never have we been put in the position that we are in now, where we don’t know exactly when we will be able to open the building and what church life will look like when we do. What do we do in this unfamiliar territory, which seems filled with dragons and monsters and lacks the familiar landmarks we usually use to find our way forward with God? Do we add spiritual retreat to our physical retreat and give up on the idea of ever having an in-person church community again? Do we open our doors without regard to the risk to the most vulnerable, and do what we have always done to show our faith in God?

We need new orders, but our secular authorities have been of limited help in providing them. They can tell us when we can open our doors legally and some of the things we should not do if we want to be safe. But they can’t tell us when the time is right to open the building, or how to be the Church when so many of the very things that mean “church” to us are on their hit list, like congregational and choir singing, corporate responses and affirmations, passing fellowship pads and offering plates, sharing Communion, coffee hour, hugs, and healing. I and every pastor I know have never craved a map of the future so badly because we were never trained in how to do Church in a pandemic in seminary, and as far as we all know, God’s orders to us have not changed: “Go out into the world and witness to the good news;” “Go out and be the body of Christ;” “Go out and teach all that Jesus commanded.” “Care for one another.” “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.”

We are in an unsettling position right now. But that’s not entirely a bad thing because in the same way that our pandemic-inspired grief and fear made us able to appreciate the first Easter all the more, our pandemic-inspired confusion and uncertainty now puts us in the perfect position to appreciate Pentecost in a way like we never have before. We are used to thinking of Pentecost as that holiday when we have people speak different languages in worship or celebrate

¹ Slide shown of dragon on map.

² As told in “*The Six Longest Short Verses in the Bible*,” HOMILETICSONLINE.COM, May 7, 1995, retrieved from 5-20-20 from <https://www.homilecticsonline.com>.

the Church's birthday with cake and balloons. But on the Pentecost when the Holy Spirit swooped through Jerusalem, the disciples weren't thinking about the birth of the Church because it didn't exist yet, and when they spoke in different languages, even they didn't know quite what to make of it. "What does this mean?" they wondered. Listen again to some of the adjectives and adverbs that characterized the day according to Luke: "suddenly, violent, as of fire, bewildered, amazed, astonished, perplexed." Although Pentecost artwork usually depicts the disciples almost like birthday candles themselves with little flames on their heads,³ the texts suggests an experience far more unnerving than festive. They did not know what to make of what was happening to them.

They weren't to blame for their cluelessness any more than we are now. Up until that point, religion for them involved making sacrifices in the Temple a few times a year for holidays and following Jesus around the countryside listening to him preach. Jesus had sent them out on a few field ed. assignments, but for the most part, up until that Pentecost morning, their ministry had been characterized primarily by following, not leading. They weren't trained evangelists; they were mostly illiterate fishermen, tax collectors, and political zealots. Yet suddenly, amazingly, the Spirit transformed them into itinerant preachers and teachers, ambassadors for Christ, willing to leave everything familiar and risk their lives to share the good news to the ends of the earth. Peter, the bold, but often foolish fisherman became the first, then others followed. Imagine how awkward those first few months of apostleship must have felt. The Spirit had made them eager, but they still didn't have a map of what exactly they were supposed to create or where they were supposed to go.

In the absence of a map, they opted to figure things out as they went along. In the beginning, at the Spirit's prompting, they concentrated on getting the Word out and baptizing people. Then, to ensure that the new converts in the faith would be able to remain faithful under stress, they added gathering in community, sharing meals together, reenacting the Last Supper, and praying. Next, they added pooling financial resources so that they could care for widows and orphans and those who couldn't feed themselves. Over time they added singing, and reading Paul's letters and later, the gospels. They met in people's homes, in parks and rented halls. It really wasn't until close to the 4th Century that the word "Church" became associated with specific buildings; before that, the word described a people who followed "the way" of Jesus. That way was never spelled out for them ecclesiastically, so their worship practices were not uniform. Yet with the Spirit's help they were able to follow it so well, that the Church grew and grew and grew.

Unfortunately, the spontaneity, creativity, and diversity of the early Church didn't last. After the Church became institutionalized under Constantine, Christians grew less dependent upon and open to the work of the Spirit, and more determined to preserve tradition rather than break from it. Buildings and architecture, rules and rituals became the focus. Although churches in the Middle Ages left holes in their roofs called, "Holy Spirit holes," purportedly to allow the Spirit to enter the building, they were not really open to radical change.⁴ Everything was scripted

³ Slides of Pentecost images available on Google images shown.

⁴ Enniss, P.C., "God's Odd," in THE JOURNAL FOR PREACHERS, Pentecost 1997, 37.

down to the holes, which were actually used like stage doors on Pentecost to allow them to release doves and rose petals down upon the congregation. Now, we don't even bother with all that. We celebrate Pentecost with balloons and birthday cake, thoroughly domesticated symbols to capture a holiday that was originally about as undomesticated as it could be. Although pastors often quote Annie Dillard's famous line that Christians would be wearing crash helmets not Easter bonnets in Church if we had any sense of what we were doing when we prayed for the Spirit to come, no one really expects that kind of drama or seeks it.⁵ Pentecost for us has been more about celebrating what we already have and love, than about opening ourselves to creating something new.

This year is different, however. This year the virus has made it impossible for us to celebrate what we have in the usual way, and it is going to force us to make changes whether we want to or not. This year, we need a spiritual infusion of creativity and boldness, of courage and imagination, to figure out how to be the Church in a new way. But thankfully, there is already abundant evidence that the Spirit is already at work doing just this. Within two days of announcing that their buildings were closed, churches around the country including ours, that didn't even have developing virtual ministries in their long-term plans, began offering worship online. Suddenly, amazingly, instead of being a bunch of dwindling congregations focused on life inside their buildings, the Church burst out of the doors of buildings everywhere and began to grow exponentially into a collection of house churches all over the globe. While people like me stared perplexed at their phones trying to figure out how to preach through them, people like you took the leap and said, "I will worship and glorify God in a new way because no virus is going to take my God or my community away from me."

Think about how astonishing that is! Technophobes who never felt the need for a smart phone or computer are buying these things and learning how to Zoom and Facebook so that they can connect with God and the Church, and thousands of people who had long ago stopped going into church buildings are rediscovering God where they are. This is one of the most exciting Pentecosts of my life, even without the balloons. The Church is alive and growing in ways we never imagined. That is the Spirit's doing.

Based upon what we know of the first Pentecost and what we have seen so far, moreover, I think it is safe to assume that the Spirit isn't done with us yet, not nearly. When the time comes for us to gather in person again, the Spirit is going to show us how to work around the restrictions to worship in person in new ways that we otherwise might never have tried. This may be bewildering and perplexing and unnerving and exciting all at the same time, so feel free to put on your crash helmet if the thought frightens you. But if we open ourselves now to the Spirit with the confidence of those who know that the Spirit truly is God with us, and not a dragon or monster, then amazing things will happen.

A friend of mine is the director of a project called, The Jüdische Kulterbund Project, which can help us think about this positively. The original Jüdische Kulterbund was a federation

⁵ See Annie Dillard quotes, GoodReads.com, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/170797-on-the-whole-i-do-not-find-christians-outside-of>

of the arts for German Jews, founded during World War II after the Nazis forbade Jewish people from sharing their art, music, and theater with non-Jews. The Jüdische Kulturbund preserved some of the Jewish community's great works of music, art, and theater, and hired thousands of performers, giving them a safe place to voice their feelings about their oppression. Eventually it too was shut down as genocide became the Nazis' goal. But drawing upon their example, my friend, Gail Prensky, has founded a modern organization, the Jüdische Kulturbund Project, to preserve, protect, and promote the arts in places around the world where oppressors would silence them.⁶ The organization focuses on all forms of artistic expression, and all kinds of artists and musicians from 27 countries now. One of the many ways it brings attention to the work is by offering educational workshops around the States to teach young people about how the arts can give voice to powerful messages in the midst of oppression. "Imagine, for example," a workshop leader might say, "that you want to make a beautiful Valentine to convey your love for someone. But your government has made it a crime for you to use the color red or to write the word 'love.' What could you create that could still convey your message?" Then the participants in the workshops are invited to try doing this, as they learn about the work of others have done the equivalent around the world.

This is our task in the Church. Jesus told us to share a Valentine with the world— a message of God's love in Christ. He told us to give glory to God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. In this uncharted territory where the monster Coronavirus is now the oppressor, however, we cannot convey the message in the usual way, through live singing, communal liturgy, and large gatherings filled with hugs and food. This is heartbreaking for those of us who cherish all of these practices. But it doesn't mean that we can't be or do Church. We just have to approach it differently. We have to step into the first disciples' shoes, set aside our expectations and experience, and allow the Spirit to show us new ways.

For example, just because we can't have live singing, doesn't mean we can't have music. Our bells can still ring out, and our screens can still show videos. People who play instruments can still perform. Perhaps the Spirit will prompt you to give voice to your love of God by learning handbells, or by digging out your old clarinet or guitar to help us praise the Lord. Perhaps the Spirit will inspire you to record a video of you singing at home that can be shown in worship. Similarly, although we won't be able to have corporate responsive liturgy for a time, we will still need the service to be participatory, not passive. It can't just be the Pastor Elizabeth show. There are lots of ways to participate. We could share artwork or poetry our children or we ourselves create. We can dance, make signs, or use sign language. Although we can't read liturgy as a group, we may be able to have individuals all around the sanctuary read lines of liturgy instead of a single liturgist and resume our dialogue church Sundays. Now is the chance for us to be the priesthood of all believers in a whole new way. Think about the Valentine you could offer. The Spirit will help us to find ways to make people welcome even with masks and social distancing, and then outside of worship, the Spirit will enable us to do mission through advocacy, cards and phone calls, financial donations, and more.

⁶ For more information, see www.judischekulturbund.com. In addition to the regular programming of the project, right now, the Jüdische Kulturbund Project has also created on Facebook a group called "Covid-19: The Oppressor" which allows artists from around the world to post and share their artistic responses to the pandemic.

If we truly open ourselves to the Spirit, instead of just grieving what we feel we have lost, we can do all the things the early church did in new ways. I think we will be astonished by what the Spirit creates through us— a new way of doing church that is more inter-generational, more participatory, and more out in the world than behind closed doors. In fact, when the time finally comes that we can restore what we have had to give up, I wouldn't be surprised if we find that we like some of the new ways better. So, join me this Pentecost in opening your mind and heart to the Spirit's work. It may have taken a virus to open the Holy Spirit holes in the Church, but the good news of the Gospel is that "Covid the Oppressor" doesn't have the power to close them now. The Spirit is loose, and even now dancing on our heads. What does that mean? It means we are in very good hands. In this new territory we can expect to be amazed and maybe surprised, but most of all, we can expect that the Lord will be with us every step of the way, enabling us to fulfill our calling to get out the message of Christ's love for all in ways which will change us and the world. Amen.